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ABSTRACT

The question of what variables affect success in debate has long been an area of interest and concern in the forensic community. For many years, it was thought that traditional performance variables--delivery, reasoning, organization, analysis, refutation and use of evidence--were the key factors influencing evaluations of debaters. Some authorities have suggested that broader, more general standards dictate evaluation. These factors include geographical variables and gender. Some authorities have abandoned attempts to determine the weight of specific variables and embraced a holistic approach to debate speaker evaluation. Although the trend is toward holistic evaluation, additional research is warranted; such a movement may not be justified. It might be an interesting personal experiment for judges confronted with a ballot that offers "boxes" to attempt to mark them and to see if that evaluation is consistent with their holistic evaluation. (Seventy notes are included.) (Author/RS)

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"Holistic Speaker Evaluation--A Review and Discussion"

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Abstract - "Holistic Speaker Evaluation--A Review and Discussion"

The question of what variables effect success in debate has long been an area of interest and concern in the forensic community. For many years, it was thought that traditional performance variables--delivery, reasoning, organization, analysis, refutation and use of evidence--were the key factors influencing evaluations of debaters. Some authorities have suggested that broader, more general standards dictate evaluation. These factors include geographical variables and gender. Some cities have abandoned attempts to determine the weight of specific variables and embraced a holistic approach to debate speaker evaluation. This paper reviews the literature surrounding the use of traditional indicators of speaker success. Other variables that may influence evaluation and success are also examined. A detailed discussion of the need for further research in this area is offered. There is, finally, a discussion of non-research interests as well.

To paraphrase Quintilian, an outstanding intercollegiate debater is simply a "good person debating well." Unfortunately, little consensus has emerged as to what combination of elements constitute "debating well." There has been a longstanding controversy in the debate community surrounding this question. Forensics scholars have long been uncertain as to whether specific, observable elements account for good debating and successful debating, or whether more abstract, non-performance factors play a more central role.

Much of the intercollegiate debate community has, at least implicitly, endorsed a standard evaluation form which suggests that six factors are of the greatest importance in debate performance: delivery, reasoning, organization, analysis, refutation, and use of evidence. These six factors are included on the American Forensic Association's Form C debate ballots to facilitate uniform evaluation of debate speakers. Many other debate ballots utilize similar variables.

Previous literature has endorsed the validity of utilizing the six factors on the Form C ballot for evaluation. For instance, Professor Burgoon found that a "correlation analysis" computed among the six predictor variables and the criterion variable, "revealed that actually all of the six predictor variables by themselves were significantly related to percentage of wins."[1] She went on to note that "while organization and refutation emerged as being slightly more important, all six factors were relatively equal in their impact."[2]

Other scholars have also recognized the relevance of the six Form C factors. "The Williams, Clark, and Wood findings suggest that the traditional criteria have a major impact." although they do go on to note that "they are not independent."[3] Professor Giffin of Kansas conducted a study which found elements very similar to these traditional six, as constituting the

majority of evaluative criteria employed by debate judges. Giffin explained the results in this fashion:

> ....the criteria employed in each debate by each judge were tabulated; of the total consideration given to all different criteria it was found that the judges gave to each of the criteria included in our hypothesis the following weight or consideration:
>
> 1. ability to speak well (delivery).....14.65%
> 2. selection of logically defensible arguments (case).....19.10
> 3. support of arguments with information (evidence).....17.18
> 4. perception of irrelevant or irrational arguments (refutation).....17.00
> 5. phrasing of concepts clearly and concisely (language).....5.29
> 6. ability to analyze the topic area (analysis)..... .....14.78
> 7. ability to organize ideas into a structured whole (organization).....8.88
>
> 96.88%[4]

Whether each of the six traditional factors independently weigh upon a judge's evaluation and decision is still open to question. For example, Professor Wise has suggested that the "two most difficult skills in academic debate, as measured by mean scores, are 'analysis' and (the use of) 'evidence.'"[5] The question of whether these two factors, or any of the other four, are actually more important, or whether they function synergistically would seem to warrant examination of each factor individually.

Gerald Sanders has operationally defined reasoning "as the process by which we infer a conclusion from premises."[6] Although Sanders does not attempt to quantify the relative weight that reasoning plays in a debate judge's evaluation, he does note that one should "emphasize the importance of reasoning in argumentation and the part that it plays in a judge's decision."[7]

Other authorities have suggested that reasoning is at least as important as a debater's use of evidence. Professor Cathcart has noted:

> ....the speaker who skillfully incorporates into his own thinking the evidence gathered, and then weaves it smoothly into his speech, will be just as effective as, if not more so than, the speaker who stops to cite sources for all of his evidence, or the one who documents and qualifies each source.[8]

Again, reasoning is identified as important but the relative weight of such importance is still unclear.

One could surmise that reasoning would obviously be important as a debate skill, but the difficulty in attempting to independently measure its importance is equally obvious. The pervasive nature of reasoning in relation to debate may make it difficult to separate it from other factors.

The great majority of contemporary forensic literature seems to place little value on the independent worth of delivery. Indeed, the conclusion reached by Vasilius and DeStephen seems quite true: "In debate the attitude toward delivery is ambivalent."[9] Indeed, they went on to note that the "overall lack of significance suggests that a variety of factors contribute to debate success of which delivery, at least in quantitative terms, may be of little importance."[10] Sanders has concurred by noting: "The judge who uses argumentation and logic as his sole criteria for determining the winner of an academic debate sees debate as an intellectual contest with speech being only an incidental element."[11]

There is actually a solid body of quantitative research which confirms the limited independent value that most debate judges and scholars assign to delivery. An analysis of judging philosophy statements found that:

> Only a few critics indicated they 'generally give low points to spread debaters.' So long as debaters met basic requirements for intelligibility, most participants tolerated this form of discourse, 'believing the ultimate value of competitive debate to be analysis and not oratory.'[12]

Similarly, delivery or "speaking ability" has been ranked extremely low in terms of its importance as an educational by-product of debate. Professor Pearce noted that: "A recent survey of attitudes toward forensics in the U.S. found that members of the American Forensic Association themselves ranked the development of speaking ability last in a list of educational objectives."[13]

Delivery appears to be one factor of evaluation that clearly weighs less heavily than others. The consensus seems to be that it is not sufficient alone to determine the outcome or total performance evaluation of a debate.

There is very little debate-specific literature in relation to the importance of organization. There is general literature concerning organization and speech communication. For example, Elaine Winkelman Butcher has observed:

> Results of some previous experimental studies indicated that speech organization did not contribute to message comprehension. Other studies claimed that credibility was not impaired by disorganization and that disorganization did not affect attitude. On the other hand, the majority of the literature as well as speech textbooks acknowledge the importance of speech organization.[14]

However, Butcher has also noted that disorganization is not inherently negative or counterproductive. She noted:

> Results confirmed the importance of message organization on comprehension, but not on knowledge in some cases. Further, disorganization is detrimental to credibility only on those factors of qualification and safety, but not on warmth. Finally, this study showed no effect of message disorganization on attitude toward the topic.[15]

The controversy over the importance of organization in relation to speech generally would seem to be relevant to debate as well. If judges are more concerned simply with the outcome of arguments, organization may not be key. However, good organization may very well effect the outcome of a given argument. Hence, the value of organizational ability as an independent factor in debate evaluation would appear to be open to question.

"Analysis is," according to Sanders, "the arriving at an understanding of the proposition and the discovering of the issues inherent therein."[16] Newman has suggested that deliberative speakers, one would assume this could include the debater, "find that one of their most important tasks is analysis, or breaking a proposition down into its component parts."[17] Professor Rieke has applied the concept more specifically to debaters by noting that "analysis involves essentially two processes: discovering what basic questions must be asked in considering the resolution; and discovering what basic lines of reasoning are appropriate in setting about to answer the questions."[18]

Analysis is another factor, like reasoning, that seems to be generally important, but very difficult to isolate and measure against other factors. Indeed, Professor Rieke's comment above clearly draws an interrelationship between analysis and reasoning, further complicating the situation.

Evidence and evidence usage appear to be factors that have stimulated a good deal of debate-related literature. "Evidence is," notes Sanders, "an indispensable element in good debating and the argumentation and logic judge treats it as such."[19] In fact, a concern for evidence use is central to the selection of a debate resolution. Sanders, writing again, has noted:

"One of the criteria used for choosing an intercollegiate topic is that adequate evidence should be available on both sides of the proposition."[20]

According to William Dresser, "contemporary theorists generally agree that the use of carefully selected and tested evidence is important to the advocate...."[21] There are many who feel this is particularly true for the debate advocate. "Championship level debaters," according to Benson, "not only use the greatest amount of evidence but also use a greater portion of their evidence to clash with their opponents by denying arguments or establishing counter contentions."[22] Benson has quantified such usage levels: "The championship debaters, /operationally defined as those qualifying for elimination rounds at major tournaments/, use about 25% more evidence than the varsity level debaters, /operationally defined as those with one year or more experience/, and nearly 60% more evidence than novices."[23]

Although "championship" level debaters tend to use more evidence and evidence usage is generally recognized as important, there is no firm consensus on its value or effect. "McCroskey's findings," for instance, "that evidence is the least valuable factor for immediate attitude change" obviously casts doubt upon the inherent value of evidence usage.[24] "In debate situations," according to Vasilius and DeStephen, "where the critic must render an immediate decision, the quantity of evidence may be unimportant or at least not as important as other factors."[25]

Many feel that evidence is interrelated to other factors and debating skills. Some authors have suggested "that evidence is used to support arguments and cannot be considered separate from the arguments."[26] Professor Dresser has also suggested that evidence tends to work with, or aid other factors. He has reported that:

> This study tends to support the position of those contemporary theorists who hold that the importance of carefully tested evidence in speech making lies not in its contribution to persuasiveness but in its usefulness in helping the speaker to explore his subject intelligently.[27]

The bottomline of contemporary forensic research seems to be that the value of evidence usage is simply uncertain. Kathy Kellerman summarized the situation rather succinctly:

> In contrast to the teachings of most introductory communication courses, theoretical consensus and empirical validation of the usefulness of evidence to a speaker have yet to be established. Indeed, the plethora of empirical research on evidence has produced such inconsistent results that no coherent theoretical perspective on the usefulness of evidence in argument can be extracted.[28]

Professor Sanders has defined the last of the six traditional standards in this way: "Refutation is considered to be the attempted destruction of the opponents' argumentation."[29] Sanders feels that refutation is one of the key elements that a judge considers in his evaluation of a debater. He has noted:

> In this area of the debate, the judge is watchful for a debater's exposure of weaknesses in the opposing case. Such weaknesses could be questionable analysis and interpretation, flaws in evidence, fallacies in structure and argument, and inconsistencies and contradictions in argument.[30]

There are others who have suggested that refutation is the single most important element for evaluation. "If any single measure could be applied to determine the potency of a debater," writes Professor Faules, "that measure would examine refutation skill."[31]

The results of actual debates seem to validate the relative importance of refutation. Faules noted that "winning debaters were scored superior more frequently for refutation than any other item. Such evidence indicates that refutation skill may be a predictor for debate effectiveness."[32] Keeling also found that "the greatest difference in the scores of winning and

losing debaters occurred in the area of refutation. In addition, winning debaters were scored superior more frequently for refutation than any other item."[33]

Despite evidence correlating debate success and high scores for refutation, there is still doubt as to whether it is refutation alone that actually accounts for this. In fact, Sanders has gone on to suggest that rebuttal may be equally or more important than simple refutation. He noted: "Rebuttal is the attempted rebuilding of an argument once it has been attacked. It does no good to refute an opponent's argumentation if your own case is in shambles."[34] Even Faules has suggested that refutation may be inherently dependent upon other factors. "The presentation," that is delivery, "of refutation will decide its potency."[35] He has also noted that the whole process of refutation is "dependent upon a student's ability to examine evidence, reasoning, and the relationship of evidence and inference."[36]

Apparently, refutation is a critical element relating to debate success, but one dependent upon other factors as well. Faules, for example, has clearly drawn an interrelationship between reasoning, evidence, and refutation. Refutation may well be important, but absent its foundation in these other factors it may well be impotent.

The bulk of contemporary literature tends to endorse the six Form C evaluation factors as important, but it fails to distinguish any one as being uniquely important absent the other five. Indeed, Professor Burgoon has found that: "Debaters who were rated high on any one dimension were consistently rated high on the other five."[37] Vasilius and DeStephen have also found a lack of independent criteria for debate evaluation. They have noted:

> Research indicates that debate evaluation is multidimensional, that some evaluative dimensions are more important than others, and that the dimensions are not independent, despite "boxes" on a debate ballot indicating evaluative factors.[38]

Burgoon and Montgomery have gone so far as to suggest that broader, general standards actually account for evaluation rather than the traditional six. They reported:

> The collapse of previously discovered dimensions into three in this investigation is a significant finding. It implies that when respondents are asked to reveal their standards for evaluation rather than to rate actual people, a different judgmental structure appears. When evaluating actual people, it seems possible to distinguish among composure, sociability, and character attributes. However, when the ideal is to be rated, all of these attributes seem to be intertwined. The logical extension of this finding is that judges probably only evaluate debaters along these three general lines rather than making six independent judgments, as presumed by the old Form C ballots.[39]

Hence, these general lines may be more important than the specific criteria suggested by current debate ballots.

Many judges have taken the option of simply providing a total score for debate performance and ignoring the "boxes" occupied by the six traditional factors. In relation to such action, Professor Burgoon has written:

> The failure of judges to discriminate among the six elements implies that either (1) they are only making a gross, global evaluation, (2) they are unable to translate their true evaluation criteria into marking behavior (which reduces the utility of the ballots as feedback to debaters), or (3) other factors are influencing their decisions.[40]

The possibility of "other factors," perhaps nonperformance variables, effecting the outcome or evaluation of a debate is most pronounced. This is, of course, generally true in regard to speech evaluation as Larry Barker has noted:

> The many uncontrollable variables present in the evaluation situation, coupled with different concepts of the ideal speech, compound the problem.
>
> Evaluations of communication behavior appear to be influenced by a combination of environmental, perceptual, and hereditary factors that influence human judgement.[41]

Such factors could obviously influence a judge-evaluator of a debate round.

Debate-specific studies have attempted to measure the effect of nonperformance variables on the outcome of debate rounds. Professor Wise has offered one example:

> Although wins over a year's debating will be approximately equally divided, affirmative teams score higher on the average on the six scales than do negatives, particularly on "organization" and "delivery." The first affirmative rebuttal speech and the first negative constructive speeches are "crucial" speeches in a standard format debate.[42]

The particular variables of "side" and "speaker position," however, do not appear to significantly affect the outcome of debates. Sidney Hill found "that the format variables 'side of topic' and 'speaker position' have no significant effect on the overall outcome of intercollegiate debates as measured by the dependent variable index of outcome."[43] Any effect associated with topic side would seem to simply reflect pure chance. Halstead concurred by noting:

> These figures indicate, then, that there may be a slight advantage for one side on a specific debate question, but that there seems to be no particular advantage for Affirmative per se or Negative per se. Even this advantage may be pure chance, and it is so slight an advantage that it is not likely to influence the decision in a specific debate.[44]

Two other nonperformance variables have produced more controversial findings as to their effect on intercollegiate debates. Those variables are proximity and gender (of debaters and of judges).

"Physical location alone," Brooks has noted, "exerts a powerful influence on amount of interaction....The powerful, almost mechanical, effect of physical distance on friendship patterns is consistently documented."[45] Brooks has further explained that:

> Both the conclusions of debaters and the conclusions of scholars studying debate judging indicate that debate decisions are based on something other than the criteria listed on debate ballots. Hidden criteria, sometimes suggested by debaters, are social distance and geographic distance.[46]

Brooks further reported that "geographical distance was related to debate decisions in a manner not predicted by chance in five of the six tournaments" that he studied.[47]

Hill has also examined the variable of geographical distance, or proximity. Hill noted: "Schools normally do a major portion of their season's debating within their National Debate Tournament district, thus potentially fostering 'friendship through propinquity'....."[48] Hill felt such influence was possibly overstated. He noted: "Because these district lines tend to represent natural lines of travel and traditional rivalries, the effects due to simple geographical proximity might well be over-ridden by the pressures of district loyalty."[49] Hill further noted that his "model indicated that, within any given N.D.T. district, proximity was a negative influence. Perhaps, in this case, proximity led to the growth of rivalries rather than friendships."[50]

The variable of gender has inspired even greater controversy among forensic scholars. For example, Hayes and McAdoo have found gender to effect speaker rankings beyond simple chance. They reported:

> The conclusion is that in debates involving at least one mixed team, the rankings received by both males and females systematically differ from those expected by chance. Under these conditions females receive more "one" and "three" rankings but fewer "twos" and "fours." At the same time males differ from chance in that they receive more "twos" and "fours" but fewer "ones" and "threes."[51]

It has further been suggested that gender can affect total outcome (win/loss), not only individual rankings. Rosen, et al found "there is no difference between male and female teams with regard to winning, but mixed teams are more likely to win."[52]

Some authorities feel that the success of male-female teams actually reflects other factors at work. Hensley and Strother reported:

> At least two reasons can be advanced for the advantage of the male-female teams. First, there may be instances when the respective styles of the male and female

> tend to complement each other better than if members of the same sex were debating as colleagues. Secondly, while in truth, there may be no difference in the abilities of the two sexes, coaches may be reluctant to pair a male and a female.[53]

Hensley and Strother further suggest that single gender teams are neither more or less successful. The results of their study fails "to give any credence to the superiority of a team composed of two males or to the inferiority of a team composed of two females."[54] In fact, the success of single gender teams seems to reflect chance alone. Hensley and Strother noted: "By the laws of chance alone, debating teams can be expected to win 50% of their debates and, indeed, teams composed of two males or of two females have records which conform very closely to this expectation."[55]

The gender of those evaluating speech acts may play some part in how those evaluations occur. This has been found to be generally true in the field of speech communication. According to Barker: "A meaningful relationship was found between instructor's speech ratings and the sex of the communicator."[56] In relation to debate, Hill found that "female debaters tended to be associated with lower team ratings than did male debaters. Conversely male judges tended to give lower team ratings than female judges."[57] Hill went on to explain the expected ratings involved in various situations:

> This model indicates that the members of mixed teams received lower ratings than either all-male or all-female teams. Before a male judge, the expected speaker rating for the male member of a mixed team was 19.50, as compared to 22.80 for a male debater with a male colleague before a male judge. The expected rating was 19.12. When debating before a female judge, the female in a mixed team had an expected rating of 19.33.[58]

Hill went even further to suggest that:

> ....for any given debate, then these results indicate that all-male teams had a greater expectation of winning before a male than before a female judge. Mixed

> teams and all-female teams, however, had an expected loss from male judges and an expected win from female judges.[59]

Hence, gender of the judge in relation to gender of the debaters involved may well influence evaluations made by those judges.

The inconsistency and uncertainty_ surrounding debate speaker evaluation is obvious. Many scholars have advocated increasing the amount of empirical and quantitative research conducted in the entire field of forensics.[60] This would seem to be one area ripe for such investigation and analysis.

Indeed, the need for data specifically relevant to success in debate is most pronounced. Burgoon and Montgomery have noted:

> ....the controversy over what constitutes superior debating has generated much speculation and prescription but very little empirical verification. Debaters and judges alike are still uncertain of the universal standards (if any exist) by which debaters are evaluated during debate competition.[61]

Burgoon went on to be more specific in advocating further research:

> ....more research using multivariate techniques is needed to obtain a realistic assessment of what factors generate success in debate. Efforts should be made to combine the traditionally identified factors with such variables as geographic biases, sex, reputation of the team's school, source credibility, and refutation forms so that relative influence of each can be determined.[62]

Williams and Webb have stated that "there is little research evidence that lends insight into the actual bases for judges' decisions."[63] This confirms what has been indicated all along: there is little knowledge as to what elements actually affect evaluation. The need for such information was underscored by Brooks, who reported:

> An integral part of learning is evaluation and feedback. In the educational process we assume that evaluation is a rational act involving systematic analysis and judgment based on relevant criteria, and that the evaluation should be fed

> back to the learner so that appropriate understandings and behaviors are positively reinforced and erroneous understandings and behaviors are corrected.[64]

The educational necessity for evaluative feedback was confirmed by Professor Burgoon:

> Certainly if students are to learn what elements truly contribute to effective argumentation and specifically to successful intercollegiate debate, we must identify those factors that are relevant and those that deserve the most emphasis.[65]

Verderber summarized the concept best by stating: "Intercollegiate debate should be an educational experience; anything that can be done to improve its value is worth the time and effort."[66] Hence, if further study were to aid the evaluation and feedback process for debate it would be well worth the effort.

Further research may also aid in the overall process of training debaters. "Training procedures," noted Willmington, "varied widely, and it seemed that the type of training a coach gave to his debaters depended more upon his whims than upon any consensus as to good training procedure."[67] Whim would certainly seem to be an insufficient approach to debate and argumentation training. Further research into the variables affecting debate success would offer a more reasoned alternative to whim alone.

Hill has concluded that "judges simply don't check the boxes any more."[68] In other words, the traditional evaluation technique provided on Form C debate ballots is being increasingly ignored. There has even been movement toward abandonment of the "boxes" entirely. Whether this is a wise option or not is a question that also warrants additional research. The risks associated with an abandonment induced by insufficient research were explained by Burgoon:

> Abandoning the Form C-type ballot, however, may mean losing valuable information about what factors in reality determine debate success. If, in fact, the six components of evidence, organization, reasoning, analysis, refutation, and

> delivery are critical factors, we need to know three things: how much of the success they actually account for, what the relative importance of each is, and how independent the judgments are.[69]

The current trend toward holistic speaker evaluation may be premature.

On a very pragmatic basis, the knowledge of what constitutes successful debating may be extremely important to the very existence of a debate program. In a period of budget-slashing and belt-tightening, few programs that cannot demonstrate their success and worth can avoid becoming the victims of such actions. Benson and Friedley note that "obtaining equitable funding and staff to coach....may be intrinsically tied to producing empirical data related to the activity's functions and claimed benefits.[70] Hence, an understanding of what factors actually make up the "good person debating well" may be the key to survival of the debate process itself.

It should be apparent that some form of additional research is warranted. Although the trend is toward holistic evaluation, such a movement might not be entirely justified. Independent of empirical research, debate scholars can take additional action. For example, it might be an interesting personal experiment for judges confronted with a ballot that offers "boxes" to attempt to mark them and to see if that evaluation is consistent with their holistic impression. Coaches and judges can also discuss these evaluative variables among themselves and with the debaters being evaluated. Such discussion probably will not create a consensus regarding evaluation. It might--as this effort has attempted--provide an important heuristic tool for the debate community.

ENDNOTES

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[22] James A. Benson, "The Use of Evidence in Intercollegiate Debate," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 7 (Spring, 1971), p. 264.

[23] Ibid., p. 262.

[24] Vasilius and DeStephen, p. 203.

[25] Ibid., p. 203.

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[27] Dresser, p. 306.

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[33] Russell M. Keeling, "An Analysis of Refutation and Rebuttal in Interscholastic Debate," as quoted in Directing Forensics: Debate and Contest Speaking, p. 190.

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[35] Faules, p. 149.

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[38] Vasilius and DeStephen, p. 198.

[39] Judee Burgoon and Charles Montgomery, "Dimensions of Credibility for the Ideal Debater," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 12 (Spring, 1976), pp. 175-6.

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[70] Benson and Friedly, p. 1.